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Scottish Bird News

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Seabirds, fish and climate – top-down or bottom-up?

Researcher with Puffin at the mist nets - Isle of May. (Akinori Takahashi)

One of the main challenges facing seabird researchers at the moment is explaining the widespread breeding failures in 2004. The direct cause was almost certainly lack of suitable food, which in most areas means sandeels, but why did this shortage occur? Bob Furness recently suggested (SBN 74) that the shortage of sandeels could partly be caused by predation by the increasing numbers of herring in the North Sea rather than by climate change. While this is an entirely plausible explanation, it raises some questions about how the abundance of fish and other animals in the sea are determined. To understand why these questions are important, it is necessary to know something about marine food webs.

Food webs describe who eats who in an ecosystem. In the open sea, everything starts with microscopic floating algae called phytoplankton that, like other plants, use sunshine as their energy source to grow and reproduce. These are eaten by various minute animals (zooplankton), which again are eaten by slightly larger animals, and so on up to fish, seals, seabirds etc. While it is obvious that energy can only flow one way through the system, as only phytoplankton can exploit the sun's energy, it is much more difficult to figure out what determines how many there are of each kind of organism. One school of thought holds that everything is determined from the bottom up: more phytoplankton means more zooplankton, more fish and finally more seabirds – or at least higher seabird breeding success. On the other hand, it could also be that predators can limit the abundance of their prey: more seabirds mean fewer fish, which again means more zooplankton, and their grazing means less phytoplankton. A classical example of a top-down process is overfishing by humans on large fish such as cod, which probably has led to an increase in the small fish that cod and other natural predators feed on. Top-down effects of seabirds on fish are probably not very important, except perhaps locally around large colonies. Most researchers would probably agree that both bottom-up and top-down processes occur, but which are most important in the sea? There is no common consensus about this, but the answer has important consequences for how we can interpret changes we see in the marine ecosystem.

So how does climate change come into this? The usual view is that phytoplankton abundance is strongly affected by climate, and climate change is often portrayed as affecting the rest of the food web through

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Sandeels for examination. *(Akinori Takahashi)*

bottom-up processes. However, there is no logical reason why climate should only affect other organisms through phytoplankton. For instance, direct temperature effects on egg development or mortality of young life stages could in principle have very strong impacts on the abundance of any organism. Bob Furness correctly points out that there has been a huge increase in the abundance of herring in the North Sea and suggests that this mainly represents a recovery from overfishing in the 1960s. In fact, the pattern of herring increase is more complex than that: Two periods of rapid increase, from ca 1975 to 1990 and since 1997, were interrupted by a sharp decline in the early 1990s. There is no indication that this period of decline was caused by overfishing, and it indicates that factors other than recovery from the 1960s crash have been important. We don't know what these factors are, but they are likely to have been of an environmental nature, for example direct climate effects or bottom-up effects connected to low food availability. So, while predation from the record-high numbers of herring may indeed have contributed to the apparent crash in sandeel populations that led to the seabird breeding failures in 2004, we also need to understand why there are so many herring before we can come to any firm conclusions about the ultimate causes of the bad season. It is still too early to say what the 2005 season will be like, but early indications from the Isle of May are that many seabirds are going to breed later than normal. Seabird breeding success is thought largely to reflect the availability of food in the sea, and if this is the case, seabirds can act as reliable monitors of the state of the marine environment. When the results for breeding success in 2005 come in, we will be closer to knowing whether last year was a one-off disaster or a part of a worrying long-term trend. By combining our data with those obtained by other marine researchers, we will try to improve our understanding of the marine food web and the factors that determine seabird breeding success. We agree with Bob Furness in his suggestion that "the sandeel problem may be rather complex", and we believe that long-term seabird studies, such as those carried on Foula and the Isle of May, will be critically important in the search for answers.

Dr Morten Frederiksen & Prof Sarah Wanless, Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Banchory

Kittiwake young wait to be fed. *(Jimmy Maxwell)*

Scottish Bird News No 76 June 2005

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Contents

Seabirds, fish and climate – top-down or bottom-up?	1
News & Notices	3
Scottish Birdwatchers' Conference – March 2005	5
2004 National Hen Harrier Survey	7
Waterston House - an update	8
Farmland bird conservation in Scotland	9
Seton Gordon 1886–1977	12
A review of crow cage trap use and misuse in Scotland 1998–2004	14
Notes & Comment	17
Book Reviews	19
Recent Reports	22

Contributions for the next issue of *SBN* should be submitted not later than 31st July 2005 to:

***SBN* Editor, SOC, The Scottish Birdwatching Resource Centre, Waterston House, Aberlady, East Lothian EH32 0PY.**

Articles can be sent on disc or by e-mail (mail@the-soc.org.uk), although we do still accept typed or handwritten material.

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NEWS & NOTICES

New SOC Members

We welcome the following new members to the Club: **Ayrshire** Mr W Reid. **Borders** Mr & Mrs J Paterson, Miss J Thomson. **Caithness** Ms K Munro. **Central Scotland** Canon & Mrs M Benton. **Clyde** Miss F Galloway. **England, Wales & NI** Mr J Finney, Mr J Pewtress. **Fife** Ms K Dick, Ms S Inglis, Mr N Penman. **Grampian** Dr H Dawson. **Lothian** Mrs E Campbell, Mr & Mrs A Charles, Mr & Mrs I Macaskill, Ms D MacWhannell, Mr F McAllister, Mr J Mitchell, Mr G Moss, Mr S Swinney, Mr & Mrs E Waterston. **Overseas** Mr J Neville. **Stewartry** Mr A Wiles. **Tayside** Mr G Christer.

2005 SOC Annual Conference

This year's Annual Conference will be held on 28–30 October at the Balavil Sport Hotel, Newtonmore and will have an international theme.

200 Club

The latest prize-winners are;
February: 1st £30 Ray Murray, 2nd £20 A. Duncan, 3rd £10 J.M. Wills.
March: 1st £30 Mrs. P. Black, 2nd £20 K. McGregor, 3rd £10 J.N. Schofield.
April: £30 Morag Rennie, 2nd £20 Dr D.M. Shepherd, 3rd £10 Miss S. Goode.

Please note that the 'new year' starts in June. Any member of the SOC over 18 is very welcome to join. The subscription is £12 per year. Please contact me at Rosebank, Gattonside, Melrose TD6 9NH.

Daphne Peirse-Duncombe

Redshank request

I am undertaking a University of Stirling/RSPB research project at Nigg Bay in the Cromarty Firth. The purpose of this work is to determine the importance of the recently created managed retreat site to waders. Redshank are being ringed by the Highland Ringing Group as part of this project. The birds can be identified by a yellow ring on the right or left tarsus (below knee) and two coloured rings on each tibia (above knee). I would be grateful if SOC members could inform me of any sightings at (a.e.crowther@stir.ac.uk) Thank you.

Amy Crowther

Natural History Book Sale

At RSPB Lochwinnoch Nature Reserve

If you have some books you would like to get off your shelves or to acquire some more (including bargains, rare books, etc) then this event is for you! **Saturday 17th to Sunday 25th September 2005, 10am - 5pm**

If you would like to donate books to RSPB, we will be happy to receive them at the centre ASAP (preferably before end of August). We can also sell books on your behalf keeping a mere 10% ourselves to cover our administration costs.

For rare/scarce books, we intend selling by auction (to stop commercial booksellers coming in and buying them straight off). If you send us any rare/scarce books, we will need a reserve price. If you are interested in a list of the rare/scarce items, please ask us to send you one. **No books will be sold** before the first day of the sale.

For further information, please speak to Joan Shaw at the reserve, telephone (01505) 842663 or e-mail joan.shaw@rspb.org.uk

'Birds of North-East Scotland' for sale on CD

The 'Birds of North-East Scotland' by Steve Buckland, Mike Bell and Nick Picozzi (1990) has long been out of print. It includes the results of a breeding atlas for Aberdeenshire from 1981–84, a winter distribution atlas, and much information on migration, habitats and many other aspects of the ornithology of N-E Scotland. With the permission of the authors, and with help from Ian Andrews, we can now offer this book on CD as a .pdf file (readable using Adobe Acrobat) for £10. If you are interested in this, please send a cheque to Ian Francis (N-E Scotland Bird Atlas, 10 Albyn Terrace, Aberdeen AB10 1YP) payable to 'Scottish Ornithologists' Club'. Sales will raise funds principally for the publication of the new tetrad atlas for N-E Scotland (in progress), but also for the SOC's '*Birds of Scotland 3*' project.

Strategy Implementation Plans 2005–2007 Now Available!

The Scottish Biodiversity Forum has just published the finalised Strategy Implementation Plans 2005 -2007. These plans identify the priority actions to implement the Strategy over its first 3 years. They are endorsed by the Scottish Executive as a key mechanism for delivering the Strategy's objectives and represent the first step towards achieving the Strategy's 25 year vision of Scotland as a world leader in biodiversity conservation.

The plans have been developed by working groups of the Scottish Biodiversity Forum involving a wide range of governmental and non-governmental partners and were consulted on over the summer 2004. We are very grateful to all of you who contributed.

Copies of the plans are available for download on our new website www.biodiversityscotland.org.uk under Scottish Biodiversity Strategy in the "What is Scotland doing?" section of the site.

The plans have also been uploaded into the UK Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS). Simply visit http://www.ukbap-reporting.org.uk and click on Scottish Biodiversity Strategy under 'Database Search". On this site, you can search the plans by a whole range of criteria including lead organisation, topic, date, text, in a user-friendly way!

The plans are also available in hard copy and can be ordered by emailing biodiversity@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or writing to:

Kathrina Mannion, Scottish Biodiversity Forum Project Officer

The danger of Ticks

The SOC has been contacted by BADA-UK, whose members suffer from Lyme Disease. They write suggesting that we warn our members of the risk of catching this debilitating and sometimes fatal disease by being bitten by ticks as we walk in grassy or bushy areas. Ticks are most active in the periods April – May and October – November. As most birders walk a lot, it's only sensible to look at some of the precautions that may be taken to avoid infection...

- Walk in the centre of paths to avoid vegetation contact
- Tuck trousers into socks
- Elasticated/drawstring fitments at ankles, wrists and waist are useful
- In dense undergrowth, leg-garters or duct tape can be used
- Tick repellents that contain "permethrin" can be sprayed on clothing - spray and let dry before wearing - not directly on to the skin
- Place suspect clothing in the dryer at high setting for 30 mins.
- Insect repellents containing "Deet" are effective – follow instructions

Lastly, if you find a tick embedded;

1 Use fine-tipped tweezers or shield your fingers with tissue, paper towel or rubber gloves.

2 Grasp the tick as close to your skin as possible and pull upward with steady, even pressure. Do not twist or jerk the tick (if mouthparts are left in the skin, remove with tweezers. Seek medical advice if concerned).

3 Do not handle, squeeze, puncture or burn the tick nor apply petroleum jelly.

4 After removing the tick, disinfect the site and wash hands.

5 Save the tick in a plastic bag for possible later identification.

These points form only a summary – for full information about the disease and advice leaflet, contact at www.bada-uk.org or at bada-uk@hotmail.co.uk

Birds and windfarms

The statements about the risks to birds at windfarms in the March *Scottish Bird News* (75: 8-9 and 21) raise some questions. For one thing, this is not a new problem - power transmission lines have been known to pose a risk (and also provide nest-sites) for birds for a long time. It is not now really satisfactory to pick a percentage out of the air to calculate turbine collision risks. The figures in a Dutch twitchers' magazine quoted on p.21 imply a total mortality of 1.3 birds and 0.003 eagles per turbine year in Germany, where turbines are now numerous, which would imply a loss of 0.12 eagles per year at 41 turbines in Skye, or just over one eagle in ten years. In fact a comprehensive review of the problem by Steve Percival in *British Birds* 98: 194-204 at the same time indicates that the risk is normally low except at places with a six-figure soaring-bird migration like Strait of Gibraltar.

In any case, the observations in Skye do not really appear to address the right problems - do the birds fly high or low, soar along ridges or quarter the ground; how are they affected by the weather, and do they take any notice of turbines? It seems likely that the number of birds killed is affected many times by the amount of care taken beforehand in siting the installations, and while the Environmental Impact Statement at our contested local site seemed rather good (in fact they saw more birds there than I did), one would also like to be sure that they include the right observations at the planning stage, before people start spending money on bad sites.

W.R.P. Bourne

Help Needed for Research on Eden Estuary Shelducks

Shelduck are one of the key species on the Eden Estuary, and one of the reasons it was made a Special Protection Area under the European Bird Directive. This large (it was once classified with the geese) and colourful duck specialises in feeding on tiny snails living on the estuary's muddy shores. Wintering numbers on the Eden have declined in the past decade, for example the 1995 February peak count was 936 birds, as compared to 246 in February 2005.

Previous ringing has shown a link with the Waddensee in Germany and Netherlands, and closer to home from the Solway and Ythan estuaries. Recently a number of birds have been fitted with a green colour ring with a white letter above and below a narrow white line. This has been done in the hope that we can get more information on how these birds use this and other estuaries, and get some answers as to why the Eden population appears to be in decline.

Shelduck ring. *(Les Hatton)*

Any reports of these, or any other colour-ringed Shelduck would be very helpful. Please send details of ring(s), which leg the ring(s) were on, date, and place seen to Les Hatton, Fife Ranger Service, Craigtoun Country Park, St. Andrews, Fife KY16 8NX. Tel: 01334 473047/07985 707593, or e-mail Les@lydox.fsnet.co.uk.

All reports will be acknowledged and details given to the finder of the sighting history of any bird they report.

Les Hatton

Scottish Birdwatchers' Conference – March 2005

"Wings of Change" was an apt title for this recent event – even the venue had changed to the magnificent surroundings of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh. 231 SOC members and friends filled the massive auditorium as Mark Holling, SOC President, welcomed delegates. To relax the atmosphere between speakers and let the audience draw breath, we were to be entertained with birdy quiz photos flashed up on the large screen – a follow-on idea from the Annual Conference where the same fun element proved so successful. We were soon into the opening lectures...

Impacts of Climate Change & Fisheries on North Sea Seabirds - Sarah Wanless

In this presentation Professor Wanless discussed the various factors in the North Sea which might adversely affect seabird breeding. 20 species of seabird breed around the UK coast in important numbers from April to August, when the sand eel is an extremely important food source. However, the sand eel is also the main target of industrial fishing in the North Sea - some 1 million tonnes per year, and this could impact on seabird breeding. Additionally, ongoing climatic changes such as increasing sea temperature could affect the sand eel population by altering the timing of the plankton blooms on which they feed.

Sarah Wanless. *(Lang Stewart)*

To try to unravel this complex picture Professor Wanless reported results from 30 years of seabird study on the Isle of May. Since these birds forage on the Wee and Marr Bankies where fishing was allowed for a number of years but then suspended, the data collected help to separate out the effects of fishing and climate change. A long term decline is shown in sand eel size as sea temperature has increased, with a dramatic drop in 2004 - the year of the lowest Kittiwake breeding success on record with widespread chick neglect. If the sea temperature continues to rise, it is likely that these negative effects will intensify, thus putting these specialists at risk. Migration of warmer water fish may help. Professor Wanless also reported that the extreme weather now more prevalent in the breeding season has had an impact on species like Guillemot, Kittiwake and Shag by restricting foraging time and range. This superb, thought-provoking talk was a great start to the day's proceedings.

John Reid

Mike Madders. *(Lang Stewart)*

Tilting at Windmills - Mike Madders

Mike Madders declared himself to be neutral about windfarms and from this position proceeded objectively and scientifically to cover a systematic list of species that could be most affected. A major dichotomy soon became evident. First, it is impossible to predict in advance of installation whether the effect on birds will be adverse or not. Secondly, the nature of the original habitat is altered by the act of installation - tree clearance, road-making and placing concrete platforms, hence the researcher does not have a firm "control" to make a before and after assessment.

Despite this, some hard data did emerge; quite dramatic changes in the flight paths of Golden Eagles were observed which had the effect of moving them off their original range. Similar effects on flight paths were seen with Divers in Lewis – both cases yield the possibility of more advantageous siting of wind-farms.

Mirroring worries regarding Blackcock lek sites, especially in Borders, Mike's findings were not too gloomy for this species, but he did reveal a 50% reduction in lekking in an Austrian study.

When Don Quixote tilted at windmills, they were figments of his deluded imagination. The structures described today are all too real and could disfigure our landscape for years to come. A thought provoking talk.

Campbell McLellan

John Reid and Lang Stewart at the Botanic Gardens. (Jimmy Maxwell)

Then a coffee break – time to catch up with friends and marvel at the excellence of the AV productions just seen – an outstanding contribution by Stephen Hunter.

A new *Birds of Scotland* - Ray Murray

Ray Murray gave us a fascinating insight into the massive amount of work involved in preparation for the new bible for Scottish birdwatchers, or "*BS3*" to the *cognoscenti*. Comparison with its predecessors by the misses Baxter and Rintoul in 1953 and Valerie Thom in 1986 shows that not only have bird populations themselves changed, but our knowledge has increased enormously. Today's array of local bird reports as well as local and national atlases have transformed our knowledge. The result will be a full-colour book with 499 species accounts (by about 150 authors) compared with 363 species accounts in B & R. The good news is that although the full price is expected to be £70-80, SOC members should be able to buy one for £50-55!

Roger Hissett

Ray Murray (right) and Ian Thomson. (Lang Stewart)

A Wild Goose Chase - Ian Thomson

Ian has been warden at Aberlady Bay Reserve for 13 years now. The reserve holds a wide range of birds including Pink-footed Geese from the Greenland and Iceland population, in fact an impressive 10% of the world population. The Pink-feet arrive in mid-September and numbers peak a month later. They have increased from 3,000 in the 1970s to

around 20,000 in recent years. Ringing and observations of neck-collared birds have shown that there is movement of birds between Aberlady and Norfolk. Ian has also followed the birds to see how far they disperse from the bay and what they feed on. He gave a very clear account of this "wild goose chase" enlivened by his characteristic good humour.

Alistair Duncan

Jimmy Maxwell and John Reid in the Tropical House. (Lang Stewart)

The 2-sitting lunch-break provided a good chance to get outside and along to some of the temperature-controlled buildings where fine displays of cacti and tropical plants were on offer. In the building shown above, a robin had established its base and sang sweetly as the visitors passed by – magic!. Back in the lunch-room, there was interest at the SOC and BTO stands, Library Committee second-hand books and Biota wildlife supplies who donated 6 bird-boxes for the new Waterston House. The afternoon's lectures proceeded...

Scottish Corn Buntings - Hywel Maggs

Hywel, RSPB Scotland's Corn Bunting Project Officer, although an experienced band player, started off with a fairly dismal but well-played tune. From being widespread in the 70s, the Corn Bunting population has crashed, with Aberdeenshire holding about 500 pairs and a modest 120-140 in the Uists. Small numbers also exist in eastern coastal areas. The bird is a specialist feeder, needing cereals in summer and stubble in winter, an inhabitant of grain rich fields and the rough grassland of field margins and ditches. Being a late nester, it has been hit hard by efficiency trends in farming since the 1970s. Late-sown barley has replaced early wheat, there are fewer weed seeds and insects and silage now commonly replaces hay.

Hywel Maggs. (RSPB)

Yet, Hywel's melody had a more cheerful end - RSPB action facilitated by his appointment, research on 38 farms into how funds from the Rural Stewardship Scheme could favour Corn Buntings, a ringing project to understand their movements in summer and winter, funds for winter-feeding at key locations and agreements with Uist crofters re. the use of traditional farming methods. Can the Corn Bunting replicate the success of the Cirl Bunting which showed a 146% rise on lands invested with support funding? Only time will tell!

Henry Martin

Kirsty Park (Lang Stewart)

Assessing the impacts of invasive alien species on bird populations - Kirsty Park

Kirsty, in her position as Senior Research Ecologist at the Centre for Conservation Science was ideally suited to investigate with us the problems of Invasive alien species (IAS). The latter have been identified as the second greatest threat to biodiversity after habitat loss. Her talk concentrated on the impacts that predatory IAS have on bird populations around the world, and how these impacts are assessed. The techniques that are currently used to assess the impact of IAS on biodiversity (e.g. dietary analysis, correlational analysis) and their uses in invasive species ecology were highlighted. However she pointed out that only by using a more experimental approach can we establish cause and effect in relation to IAS and their avian prey. She further suggested that the use of adaptive management (experimental management) would increase our understanding of the ecology and impacts of IAS without delaying critical management action which could reduce their spread. The audience were intrigued as the finer points of this currently interesting topic were explored.

Jimmy Maxwell

A quick coffee-break and on to the final two lectures...

President Mark Holling chats to Joan Wilcox. (Jimmy Maxwell)

Mapping the Future - Mark Holling

Our President is on the Committee developing the plans for the next UK National Atlas and he stressed, as previous speakers had done, the need for up-to-date accurate information about the distribution and abundance of our birds. He gave examples of the many changes between the two Breeding Atlases (1968-72 and 1988-91) and of what the single Winter Atlas (1981-84) had found. Twenty years on, a completely new Atlas is now needed, covering both winter and breeding populations and taking account of changes in land use as well as perhaps climate change. The winters 2007/08 - 2010/11 and the summers 2008 - 2011 will be covered, with publication planned for 2013. This will be a major project of national importance, and Mark inspired us to take an active part when the call for volunteers comes.

Mike Betts

The Future for Birds and Man - Jeremy Greenwood

Professor Greenwood started his talk by detailing how man's activities have affected bird populations. Rare birds have done very well as we manage their habitats and stop persecuting them, however, over half of all extinctions have been caused by the introduction of alien species. Although modern agricultural methods have resulted in a 25% decrease in farmland birds, this problem has now been recognised by the Government who are planning measures to reverse this decline by 2020.

Jeremy Greenwood, Director of BTO. (BTO)

Global climate change, caused by the burning of fossil fuels, is affecting bird populations. The cure is for more energy efficiency and also renewable energy. About one third of the earth's land surface has been altered by man and we use half of all the earth's natural resources, leaving little for other creatures. We must use less and be more efficient.

The politicians claim they are aware of these problems, but because they react to what we tell them, we must promote our views as much as possible. Professor Greenwood closed a stimulating talk by saying we must face up to the challenges ahead. It is no good being pessimistic about the environment, or we won't stand a chance.

Michael Pink

The Conference closed with Norman Elkins the clear winner of the Quiz and a few remarks from Chris Wernham concerning the "Wings of Change" theme – delegates had been convincingly informed of important current matters on the Scottish ornithological scene and given many glances into the future.

SOC Lothian Branch and BTO Scotland are to be congratulated on superb organisation and very efficient fuss-free control of events during the day. Numbers attending prove that the one-day Conference is considered something a bit special.

Jimmy Maxwell

Aberlady visit

About 30 delegates from the Conference re-assembled in Aberlady village on the next day and had the opportunity to see around and inside Waterston House, thanks to the builders John Dennis who arranged special access for the day. Guided walks were also available along the west side of Aberlady Bay closest to the new centre and into the Gosford woodlands just across the road from Waterston House - both activities which visitors to the SOC's new HQ will be able to enjoy when they are in Aberlady. Staff at Kilspindie House Hotel in the village also laid on coffee for those escaping the cold winds blowing across the bay. Everyone who came clearly welcomed the chance to see the Club's investment, especially those who had travelled from further away to attend the conference and it was pleasing to hear positive comments about the building and its design. Everyone is now looking forward to seeing it again once the doors are open to the membership and members of the public.

Mark Holling

A group being shown round Waterston House. (Keith Morton)

2004 National Hen Harrier Survey

In 2004 a national hen harrier survey was carried out, following on from previous surveys in 1988-89 and 1998. The survey unit in 2004 was the 10-km square, and complete coverage of the hen harrier range in England, Wales and the Isle of Man was achieved. In Scotland and Northern Ireland however, not all squares within the known range could be visited. Here, the majority of squares were surveyed by Raptor Study Groups and a random sample of the remaining squares were surveyed by paid fieldworkers. In Scotland, 225 squares were surveyed and the table below shows the estimated number of territorial pairs in each of the three surveys:

	1988-89	1998	2004	% change 1998-2004
Scotland	479	436	633	45
England	18	19	10	-47
Wales	27	28	43	54
N. Ireland	10	38	63	66
Isle of Man	44	49	57	16
UK & Isle of Man	578	570	806	41

Within Scotland, trends were considerably different between regions. There were increases in the number of territorial pairs in Orkney (34 to 74), Hebrides (24 to 48), North Highlands (30 to 102) & West Highlands (159-243). However, there were decreases in East Highlands (82 to 65) and Southern Uplands (117 to 64). Most of the decreases have been in areas with a concentration of grouse moors. Increases have occurred on other moorland, young conifer plantations and more mature conifer plantations containing rides with tall vegetation.

Female Hen Harrier in typical habitat.

These results were press-released in early April and a scientific paper will be submitted to Bird Study in due course. This survey was a collaboration between the Scottish and Welsh raptor study groups, Manx Bird Atlas, RSPB, SNH, EN, CCW & EHS. It was funded by RSPB, SNH, EN, CCW & EHS. We thank all the landowners who co-operated with access for survey work.

Innes Sim

(Bill Gardner)

Waterston House - an update

As I write this at the end of May, Waterston House, the new SOC's HQ at Aberlady, is tantalisingly close to completion. We had originally hoped to move in at the start of June, but the middle to the end of June now seems more likely. Despite the delays we have been exceptionally lucky with the builders John Dennis & Co Ltd., especially Stuart Vallance, the site agent, who has helped me keep the whole show pretty much to time, and to within 1 to 2% of the original construction contract price. I have also enjoyed working with the Architects Simpson and Brown and the rest of the professional design team.

Lots of progress has been made since my last update in March. In particular I'd like to thank everyone who responded so generously to our appeal for further funds to help us buy essential equipment, such as computers etc. So far, members since 2003, have contributed almost £30,000. These donations will be augmented by the large amount of Gift Aid we are able to claim this year, which amounts to almost £15,000. If you have not already signed up for Gift Aid, believe me its quite painless and it really makes a difference to the Club. Two completed Gift Aid Forms bring in the same revenue to the Club as one new member joining and is ongoing.

On site, all the lighting, plumbing, painting and flooring has been completed, along with the installation of the numerous, attractive, Douglas Fir and Larch panelled doors and windows. The exception is the front door - the main item on my snagging list, which is still giving me headaches due to material supply problems.

550 meters of superbly engineered German made library shelving system has been installed in the newly carpeted, 8 meter high, Waterston Library.

Thanks to the Forestry Commission and Russwood of Newtonmore we now have a beautiful Aberfoyle Oak hardwood floor in the entrance foyer and the art gallery corridor. The whole building has certainly fulfilled its additional role to show how attractive native grown Scottish timber can be in a public building. There is a real quality feel throughout the building helped by the wooden doors, floors and frame, complemented by the smart contemporary lights, well placed windows, generously proportioned spaces, stainless steel ironmongery and other fittings.

I have been fortunate to continue to find other gifts-in-kind donors, including, John Watson Ltd of Skateraw, Dunbar who supplied the 20 tons of gravel for our soak-away and Porcelanosa of Glasgow and Edinburgh who supplied all the tiles needed for our kitchen and toilets. This week Stewarts of Dalkeith, turf growers and retailers have promised all the turf and wildflower seed mix that we need, plus PDM of East Kilbride are supplying key drainage components at cost price. I am also grateful to Sandie Brownlie at BSW Timber, based at Earlston and Petersmuir Sawmill, who will supply all our decking timber and fencing stobs at a knockdown price. When I come to name all these generous companies and individuals it will be a very long list, made up of exclusively Scottish, French, and German companies.

Many of the visitors from these companies who have come to see the building have been hugely impressed how a small organisation like SOC has achieved a quality result. I personally have not been in a nicer timber building in Scotland. Soon you'll be able to check it out for yourselves and see the new view over Aberlady Bay, which is still to reveal itself, when the builder's big plywood fence finally comes down.

Our large wildlife pond, built by Splash Gordon of Balfron, is now full after taking a week to fill up! It has been tested by several downpours and also by the Musselburgh Fire Brigade, who successfully used the built in feed pipe, via a hydrant in our new car park. Splash Gordon also constructed a cascading waterfall, large banking and a rockery made from 50 tons of Aberfoyle rock, given by the quarry owned by the Forestry Commission. I had to apply to get planning permission from the new national park planning authority to extract these rocks! It took five, 20 ton trucks to delivery this attractive material, which will also be used for the rest of the hard landscaping and garden walling.

In the end, the suggestion to use Caithness slab round the base of the building was finally adopted and it makes a good match with the rock and the paviors we will use. The new entrance onto the main road is currently being kerbed and should be tarmacadamed by the time you read this. Our paved internal road has special paviors, linking to parking bays, which all use a hexagonal plastic matrix filled with grass. All our parking and roads on site drain directly into the ground, placing no burden on the urban drainage in Aberlady.

At the beginning of June our other landscapers come on site to build all the walling, paving and seating areas at the front of the building, together with a decking contractor who will build the pressure treated Scots Pine decking along the rear of the building and under the front gable. I'm afraid the walling/landscaping/turfing work will be on going for at least 4 or 5 weeks, though hopefully the main path and courtyard, escape routes, etc. will be ready in 2 to 3 weeks. Some planting for shrubs and trees will happen much later in the Autumn.

Planning is also well advanced to move the 600 boxes of books, which make up the Waterston Library. This effort has been co-ordinated by the Library Committee and by John Davis and David Clugston, in particular, they have both given lots of practical help here. The move itself will likely be carried out over a three week period in late June, early July. It will be good to see all the books again after their three year hibernation.

It promises to be a really exciting summer and autumn, commissioning and starting up what will become a very sophisticated operation involving a myriad of new responsibilities and opportunities for staff and members alike. Please watch the web site to see when we will open to the public and members. If you'd like to pitch in and help with the move, or the commissioning, or general office, or even garden related tasks we'd be pleased to see you during late June and July. Please call me, or Kate on 0131 653 0653 in June or 01875 871330 in July. By the way the birdwatching and the walking from the Centre are worth a trip to East Lothian at any time of the year. See you all soon at Aberlady.

P.S. Three pairs of swallows have moved in already!

Bill Gardner MBE
SOC Development Manager

Farmland bird conservation in Scotland

Corn Bunting. *(Alan Bull)*

The UK's farmland birds have declined severely, with numbers of nineteen species dropping by between 50 and 80% since the 1970s. The declines correspond to major changes in farming practices and this article will outline what these changes have been, the impacts on birds and some measures being undertaken in Scotland to stem the decline.

The loss of wildlife on farms first became apparent in the 1970s when dramatic changes were seen, such as large-scale hedge removal, woodlands felling and wetland drainage. In Scotland changes were less pronounced (and declines in some birds may have been less), but those that occurred have major implications for wildlife across the farm. Some of the main changes in agriculture in the last 30 years that have contributed to the continuing decline of many farmland birds are:

- changes in the type of crops grown
- changes in the timing of tillage, especially a switch from spring to winter crops
- use of herbicides and inorganic fertilisers
- increased farm specialisation; arable on the east coast, livestock on the west
- increased stocking rates
- the switch from hay to silage production
- loss of wetlands through drainage
- loss of habitats such as unimproved grasslands, woodlands, scrub and ponds

Farmland bird populations are vulnerable during the breeding season and in winter. Breeding populations have been affected by farming practices in several ways.

Reduction in invertebrate populations

While insecticide use is not widespread on Scottish farms, the indirect effect of herbicides has had a profound effect on invertebrates by largely eliminating broad-leaved weeds from arable crops. These weeds are a food source in themselves but also support invertebrates. Many farmland birds, including Grey Partridges and several finches feed their young on invertebrates and the shortage of these on farms is a major limiting factor in productivity.

Cropping changes and the destruction of nests

Harvest dates on farms have shifted forwards by over a month over the last 30 years due to changes in cropping. The loss of the Corncrake from much of Scotland is a well-known example of how a simple change in agricultural practice can have such a profound effect. The decline is largely due to the switch from hay making to silage. Hay making provided nest sites undisturbed until August or September, allowing chicks to fledge safely. Hay making in the Scottish climate is a very risky undertaking, with the prospect of loss of winter fodder if it rains. It is not surprising therefore that silage making has virtually replaced haymaking. A productive silage field can yield two cuts a year, the first one in June, at the most vulnerable time for corncrakes. Corn Buntings also nest in silage fields and regularly lose their nests to cutting, which may be a major factor in their decline. Corn Buntings have declined by 85% and are amongst the most threatened Scottish birds.

Changes in the crops grown are also significant. Oats used to be the main cereal crop grown on Scottish farms, but the market for oats is now very small and they have been replaced by spring barley and, in southern Scotland, with wheat. These crops are harvested much earlier than oats, which were harvested as late as September, allowing time for multiple nesting attempts. The propensity for Corn Buntings to nest in crops that are now harvested much earlier, coupled with the fact that they have the latest broods of any farmland bird, (with second broods as late as September), is another nail in their coffin. The last Corn Bunting on Orkney disappeared around the same time as the last field of oats were grown. Orkney now has little arable land and the intensively managed rye grass that has replaced it is inhospitable for this species.

One crop that has changed the Scottish landscape, oil seed rape, has had some beneficial impacts. Linnets feed the unripe seeds to their chicks and this has helped their population to increase. However, now that the direct subsidy has been removed from growing oil seed rape it will not be economic for many farmers to grow and the acreage will decline, with probable effects on Linnets.

Wild Bird cover. *(Hywel Maggs)*

Hedges and field margins provide cover. *(Nicola Penford)*

Loss of nest sites

The direct loss of habitat can result in a reduction in available nest sites, such as scrub, hedges and old trees used by Barn Owls and Tree Sparrows. The successful uptake of nest boxes by Tree Sparrows indicates that nest availability can locally be a limiting factor on populations.

Impacts on wintering birds

Huge flocks of seed-eating passerines, such as Yellowhammers, Corn Buntings, Tree Sparrows, Chaffinches and Linnets would have been a familiar sight over winter stubbles and weedy turnip fields on most Scottish farms in the past. The switch to winter crops on some farms and the lack of weeds (due to herbicides) as a source of food in winter stubbles has meant a significant loss of food for birds. Many farms used to grow 'neeps' for sheep and cattle but the humble turnip is now almost an endangered species, being a difficult crop to grow compared to silage which has replaced it on many farms. Weedy neep fields can act as giant bird tables, supporting thousands of birds when little other food is available in winter. The canopy provides protected foraging when snow cover eliminates other sources of food and the length of time the crop is in the ground allows weeds to establish. Though hard winters are less frequent, the reduced availability of resources has a general effect on winter populations.

Linnet flock. *(Hywel Maggs)*

All these changes have come about due to the combined effects of changes in technology coupled with agricultural funding by the EU that has encouraged intensification. Farmers cannot be expected to maintain uneconomic farming systems, but there are ways of creating habitats and modifying farming practices that mimic the features provided by traditional farming.

The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) is a national charity with a network of advisers providing practical advice to farmers on a range of measures. Many of these are linked to agri-environment schemes funded jointly by the Scottish Executive and the EU. The main source of funds is the Rural Stewardship Scheme (RSS), which provides up to £30,000 over 5 years for a range of options. These include grants for hedge planting and pond creation and annual management payments for options such as field margins, conservation headlands, unharvested crops to provide food for birds, wetland creation and watercourse management to reduce the impact of stock grazing. Where Corncrakes are present, such as on Islay and the Outer Hebrides, payments are available for cutting grass after 1st August to protect nests and to create early and late cover for this species.

As well as Government agri-environment schemes, FWAG is involved with a number of projects aimed at individual species, and has a well-established track record of working with the farming community, tailoring wildlife management to fit with farming systems.

Aberdeenshire and Fife are the Scottish mainland strongholds for the declining Corn Bunting and this species has been the focus of concerted efforts by RSPB Scotland aiming to stem the decline. Working in partnership with FWAG and supported by Scottish Natural Heritage, farmers in Corn Bunting 'hot spots' were asked to create habitats and food resources favoured by Corn Buntings, with management payments made. Options include oat crops grown 'extensively' without herbicides to provide weeds both in the crop and in the stubble, which are kept unploughed until March. Set-aside land is used to grow 'wild bird cover crops' - a mix of kale, oats, quinoa and rape to provide seeds and a source of insects throughout the year. Tussocky grass field margins are sown to provide invertebrates and potential nesting cover.

Intensive monitoring by RSPB of birds using the farms over the first three years of this 'Farmland Bird Lifeline' project shows

(left) Weedy turnip field. (right) The same turnip field in winter - a valuable food resource *(Ian Francis)*

encouraging results, with evidence of stability or slight increase of breeding Corn Buntings on the participating farms. This is in contrast with the continued decline of Corn Buntings elsewhere in Aberdeenshire and Angus on farms not participating in the project, studied by Adam Watson and Chris Smout. There were also significant increases in winter counts of other farmland birds such as Linnets, Skylarks, Twite and Reed Buntings, probably due to the provision of winter food resources lacking elsewhere. The monitoring re-emphasises that Corn Buntings are affected by their nesting preferences, often in crops that are harvested prior to fledging. First broods are frequently lost in silage harvested in June, and subsequent attempts at a second broods in spring barley may also be lost in the harvest. The next challenge is to design a prescription that is practical for farmers to undertake that will safeguard nest sites. This year trials are being undertaken by RSPB to pay farmers known to have nesting Corn Buntings to delay cutting silage until 1st August. This is much later than usual and will result in a decline in quality and quantity of silage. Assessing the costs incurred means farmers will need to be paid £200/ha for this option - a clear indication of the potential costs of ensuring modern agriculture can accommodate vulnerable bird species.

A similar project has been running in the Borders, this time aimed at Grey Partridges and Tree Sparrows. On behalf of the local Biodiversity Partnership, Borders FWAG has helped administer a project which has seen more than 80 farmers sow 220 acres of wild bird cover crops on set-aside land. It is the pre-eminent Partridge recovery project in Scotland and results have shown increase in breeding success as measured by brood counts.

Other initiatives include the Tayside Barn Owl Nest box project. This was based on surveys which identified the Tay corridor, Montrose Basin and the foothills of the Angus Glens as Barn Owl strongholds. Farmers in these areas were visited by FWAG and a management plan was produced, recommending management to benefit Barn Owls, such as the creation of tussocky field margins to boost small mammal populations. Funding was obtained for the production of nest boxes, which were erected by volunteers, on farms with suitable habitat.

Evidence from these local projects has been used to persuade the Scottish Executive's Environment and Rural Affairs Department to include similar options in government funded agri-environment schemes such as RSS and the new 'Land Management Contracts'. These are open to all farmers in Scotland from 2005 and potentially could provide funding for every farm to sow areas of wild bird cover. On a wide scale, this could provide sufficient food resources to make a significant difference for farmland bird populations.

Early silage cuts can destroy Corn Bunting nests *(Ian Francis)*

The future

This is a time of significant change for UK farming. From this year farmers will not receive subsidies based on the number of livestock or hectares of crop, but will receive a Single Farm Payment based on previous subsidies. The results for birds could be significant. Without direct subsidy on the crop cereal growing may cease to be economic in many upland areas, and much arable ground may be sown to grass, with a loss of foraging areas for birds. Cattle rearing could become uneconomic in remote areas without subsidy, so cattle could be replaced by sheep, or there could be a general decline in livestock. This has implications for management of wetlands of value to waders, where cattle grazing is crucial to maintain breeding habitat.

Seeds in wild bird cover crops provide food. *(Ian Francis)*

The effects of eastern European countries joining the EU will be twofold. Firstly they will implement all the intensive management practices that have led to such a loss of wildlife on Scottish farms. A recent study tour in Slovakia showed how rich the wildlife is on extensively managed farms in Eastern Europe, but farmers from western Europe, including many from Scotland, are seeing the potential for profits from this rich farmland and are renting large areas, turning small, old fashioned farms into productive prairies, with a rapid loss of wildlife. The irony is that these farms will then out-compete Scottish farms as they can produce crops, such as malting barley, at much lower cost and with the benefit of a better climate. Scottish whisky may soon be made with barley from Slovakia whilst Scottish farmers may have to make up the loss in income using agri-environment payments, which are being paid to replace the habitats lost here, and which are now being lost in Eastern Europe!

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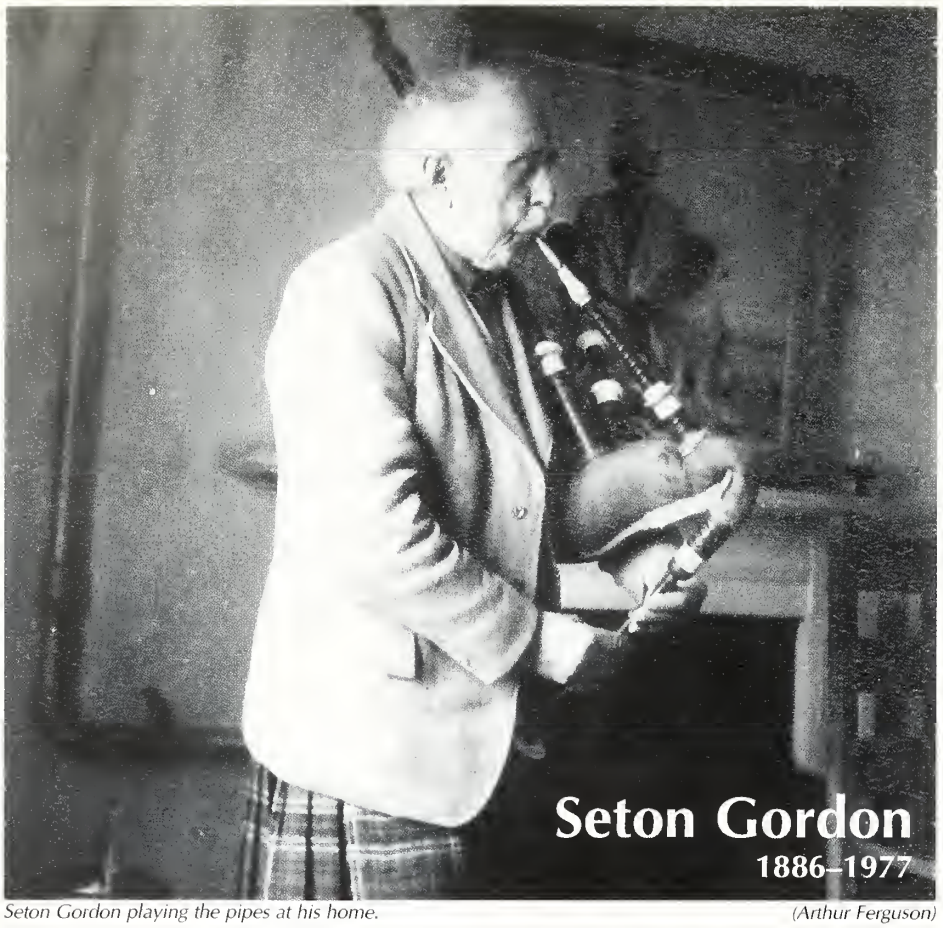


Seton Gordon playing the pipes at his home. *(Arthur Ferguson)*

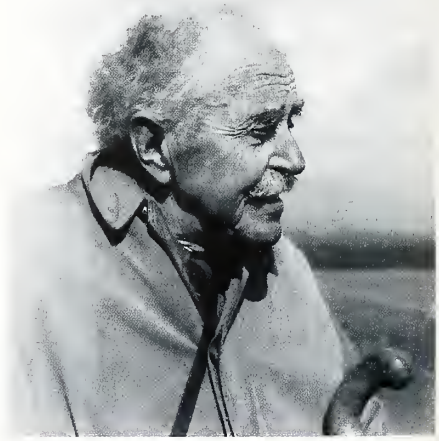
Seton Gordon observed and wrote about the natural scene and wildlife in the highlands and islands of Scotland through many decades of the twentieth century; his books hold a special place in our literature. It was my good fortune to become a friend of his during the later years of his long life. My aim in this article is to present a picture of the man as I knew him, and as revealed in his books. There is a valuable and interesting biography of him by Raymond Eagle (1991), from which I have learned much about his earlier life. His boyhood was spent within reach of Deeside and his first book "Birds of the Loch and Mountain", published when he was only 21, contains his own photographs of birds and landscape. This pattern – naturalist and bird lover, photographer and writer, was maintained for the rest of his life. He was one of the pioneers of bird photography, much helped in this work by his wife Audrey, as described in his book "Thirty years of nature photography" (1936). The black and white photographs are stunningly beautiful.

Seton Gordon thought of himself as a naturalist rather than a scientist, although possessing a degree in Natural Science. An encounter with a rare bird would delight him, but no more than observing new behaviour in birds who were old friends. He was deeply knowledgeable about the Golden Eagle, and was an authority on the alpine plants of highland Scotland. He had a fund of knowledge about highland history and folk lore, which colour his books charmingly. With his strong sense of the comic, humour was never far away in conversation or the written word. Much of his descriptive writing is so vivid that he seems close to us as we read. He was an accomplished player of the highland bagpipe, especially the "pibroch", of which he was a judge at competitions. He invariably wore the kilt, and all his life was a great hill walker. Altogether some 27 of his books were published, and in addition very numerous articles in newspapers and journals.

In 1963 I happened to read Seton Gordon's "Days with the Golden Eagle"(1927). There are vivid descriptions of nesting eagles – including the fortunes of a pair of nestlings called Cain and Abel! Almost I felt I had been watching myself through the telescope. At this time I had never seen an eagle despite holidays in the highlands when we lived in Edinburgh. My wife Mary suggested I should write to Seton Gordon, and after some hesitation I did so, addressing the letter to Seton Gordon, Isle of Skye! We were delighted to receive a reply with the offer to show me eagles if I were to visit Skye the next summer. So in May 1964 I took a holiday and motored up to Skye, leaving my unselfish wife and schoolboy sons behind in Bedford. On May 6, established at Uig, I visited the tall kilted Seton Gordon and Betty (his second wife) at their home at Upper Duntuilm. I was made welcome and after half an hour conversing, he showed me on the map the position of an eagle's eyrie on sea cliffs two miles to the north, taking me outside to point the best approach. Later, as I was nearing the cliff, I saw a huge bird with broad outstretched wings gliding and swinging across the cliff face to avoid the attacks of a Raven. My first unforgettable view of a Golden Eagle.

I stayed on Skye until May 12 and was able to have three outings in the company of Seton Gordon to view various haunts of eagles – and one day tea and delectable scones with them both. Each outing was memorable; we quickly established an unstrained relationship through our interest in the birds and wildlife around us. It was fascinating to listen to him talking about the places he knew so intimately. Every aspect of nature around us interested him and small things caught his attention. Vividly I remember how he wondered and delighted in the radiant hues of pink, pearl and blue reflected from the sky in the small pools in the marshy moorland near Loch Snoesdal – never, he said, had he before seen such a luminous glow of colours in such a way.

On May 10 we visited the headland in Duirinish known as Biod Mor at Waterstein, where there are sea cliffs 400 ft high. There was a tremendous wind from the West against which it was difficult to stand. Seton rejoiced in it, and I was able to photograph him as he sat wind-swept. Family must be the best judge of portraits: his daughter Caitriona and his wife were delighted with it, and a granddaughter wrote "It epitomises his being". I had been blessed with luck.



Seton Gordon - naturalist. *(Arthur Ferguson)*

After my visit to Skye, we corresponded regularly and I have some sixty of his letters and postcards. They largely consist, apart from personal messages, of notes on birds (especially eagles), flowers and even insects – the first bumble-bee for instance, and usually the weather also (he sent regular meteorological reports to Edinburgh). Of his letters, I think the following two will suffice to give the flavour:

Seton Gordon - naturalist. *(Arthur Ferguson)*

2.50pm May 28 1965
I am sitting in bright sun at the edge of a cliff where on May 10 last year we watched the peregrine lifted 700ft by the hurricane & the grey crow out of control. I am looking across the cliff on to an eyrie, & in it are two Eaglets, strong & apparently healthy, & about 5 weeks old. The parent is shooting up on air currents & is hotly chased by 2 Ravens – It is a NE wind, force 6 & bitter, but the sun shining on the Silene by the waterfall is magnificent. Across the Minch I see Hecla & Beinn Mhor on South Uist, more South is Canna.

Later – Very cold Max temp at home with 12 hours of sun only 50!

Swallows taking Sun Bathing Bluebottles Messages to you all Seton G.

The next letter followed a short stay on North Uist in1969. After mentioning that the exact position of an eyrie was described in a current book about the Hebrides, he continues –

7 pm June 24 1969
The two eaglets are disturbed almost daily and look most dejected. We found (a) the remains of a hide (b) a discarded map (c) a bottle of whisky – Gloag's Grouse whisky, in a crack in the rock. This we took to show the eagle-loving proprietor of the Newton Lodge Hotel Mr MacAskill who found it was, or had been, cold tea. Despite all this the young were hatched but he said that last year one egg was taken & a hen's egg substituted. Curiously enough George Waterston arrived at the hotel the same day as we did, and brought with him the two high-ups of the RSPB Peter Condor & Stanley Cramp. I was glad to see George Waterston again after many years. They were looking after the Balranald Reserve where there is now a warden in a caravan, a young chap from Bedford for this season. He watches May June July and August. The Phalaropes arrived as late as June 11 & he did not think they were nesting yet. There were many Lapwing, most with large young, & on Loch Druidibeg on S. Uist we saw several Greylag geese (not from Wilstone!)

Betty Gordon had a lovely family home with its own lake, Biddlesden Park, in Northants. Here they usually spent some time of the winter and spring. I used to meet them most years in May at the Wilstone reservoir near Tring for birdwatching. I remember arriving once to see their two figures across the water, each with a long old-fashioned telescope trained over the water, watching Black Terns. Seton spurned binoculars, always using the telescope given to him by the then Prince of Wales when they were both students at Oxford. He steadied this glass with his walking stick. I last met them at Wilstone in 1976. He had aged a lot but was mentally alert. He had difficulty climbing up the very steep bank of the reservoir, pausing at intervals, but refusing help. After tea we viewed a Heronry before parting. He died suddenly the following March, aged 90.

Betty wrote "I was so thankful that Seton had no illness at the end and was not laid up. He was up to date with everything to the last moment. 'gone to the high hills' as he would have it".

Arthur Ferguson

Dr. Arthur Ferguson was an SOC member between 1957 and 1963, holding medical posts in Edinburgh. Now living in Bedford, he enjoys trips back to East Lothian, remembering the pleasure of earlier SOC outings to Aberlady and Isle of May

This article forms the start of what we hope will become a series of portraits about great Scottish ornithologists of the past. All further ideas welcome. Eds.

Seton and Betty Gordon at Wilstone, 1972. *(Arthur Ferguson)*

A review of crow cage trap use and misuse in Scotland 1998–2004

Introduction

Crow cage traps are widely used in Scottish upland areas to control numbers of Crows, *Corvus corone*, Rooks, *C. frugilegus* Jackdaws, *C. monedula* and Magpies, *Pica pica*. They have in recent decades become an increasingly common method of pest control by gamekeepers and some sheep farmers.

Crow cage traps can be grouped into three main types: Funnel, Ladder, and Larsen traps. All three are common in Scotland, but Larsen traps are not covered in this report.

Larsen traps are small portable traps with two to three compartments. Usually one larger compartment contains a decoy bird, and two smaller ones have spring doors that are tripped as target birds enter.

Larsen trap. *(Dave Dick, RSPB Images)*

Funnel and Ladder traps are large walk-in traps usually built on site and seldom moved around, with dimensions about 3x3x2m high. Ladder traps have a trough-shaped roof with a slit or slits ('the ladder') at the bottom where target birds get in. Funnel traps have a wire mesh funnel set into a flat roof sometimes stretching down to close to the cage floor.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) makes it illegal to trap wild birds in Scotland and the UK, but Open General Licences issued annually by the government authorise the use of crow cage traps for catching certain target species for certain purposes. In Scotland, three separate open general licences cover different purposes. These include protecting wild birds, preserving public health and safety, and preventing damage to livestock, crops and fisheries The licences do not remove the responsibility of trap operators with regard to the Wildlife and Countryside Act apart from allowing them to catch wild birds. Trap operators must comply with conditions stated in the licences as well as the Protection of Animals (Scotland) Act (1912) and the Abandonment of Animals Act (1960) where the welfare of caught birds and decoys is concerned.

The licence conditions are meant to allow the effective and humane control of named target species whilst minimising the risk to non-target species that can be caught accidentally. As of December 2004, trap operators must inspect their traps daily at intervals not exceeding 24 hours and remove any caught birds. Where traps are left in the open but are not in use, they 'must be rendered incapable of holding or catching birds'. Any decoy birds must be of the same species as the target, and must be provided with adequate food, water, shelter, and a perch at all times.

The conditions are straight-forward in principle, but in detail they are ambiguous. For example, there is no instruction as to *how* a trap might be rendered incapable of holding or catching birds. This is a problem in cases where dead birds are found in traps that are claimed to have been 'accidentally reset'. The three licences are also inconsistent because only one of them mentions the use of 'decoy' birds in crow cage traps.

RSPB Scotland has long been concerned over the ambiguous nature of the Scottish (and indeed UK) legislation and the risk that this poses to the survival and welfare of both non-target and target bird species. In 1996 the death of a young Golden Eagle in a crow cage trap triggered a review of the open general licences. At that point there were no conditions concerning the use and checking of crow traps – not even a requirement for 24 hour checking. RSPB records of alleged abuse and misuse of traps, but also records of trapped birds as a whole, were used to make an assessment of the risk to non-target species, and to make recommendations for legislative changes.

In 1998 Dave Dick and Andrew Stronach produced a paper, 'The use, abuse and misuse of crow cage traps in Scotland', on behalf of the Scottish Raptor Study Groups and RSPB. It was the first of its kind. This was followed by a government consultation on the open general licence conditions in 2000. Five years later we believe that there are some important points that have not yet been dealt with effectively, and which need urgent action.

This report examines the current situation and reviews the case for further changes to licence conditions.

RSPB records

Over a period of seven years (1998 to 2004 inclusive), RSPB received 407 reports regarding crow cage traps from members of the public and field workers. The majority of reports from the public involved live birds found caught in traps. Although including so many reports, the sample will not be fully representative. The chances of a particular trap being included often depend on a hill-walker or field-worker stumbling across it. Being unpopular with the general public, traps are often placed in "concealed" folds of ground or remote parts of an estate or farm. These figures on their own make the case for an immediate change to the licences.

(left) Ladder Trap. (right) Funnel Trap. *(Dave Dick, RSPB Images)*

Results
The locations of all crow traps reported to RSPB from 1998 to 2004 appear concentrated towards the south and east and tend to be associated with upland areas. See Table 1. for all birds found.

Table 1. Bird species found in crow traps, alive and dead, 1998–2004.

Protected species	Live	Dead	Total
Merlin*		1	1
Barn Owl*	1		1
Short-eared Owl		2	2
Long-eared Owl		1	1
Tawny Owl		1	1
Sparrowhawk		2	2
Buzzard	6	3	9
Kestrel	4	9	13
Cuckoo	2		2
Mallard	1		1
Mistle Thrush	2		2
Blackbird		1	1
Starling	2		2
Pied Wagtail	1		1
Unknown passerine		1	1
	19	**21**	**40**
Target species			
Pigeon	2		2
Rook	26	8	34
Jackdaw	3	7	10
Carrion Crow	40	21	61
Corvid	22	17	39
	93	**53**	**146**
Total	**112**	**74**	**186**

**schedule 1 species*

Traps not in use
17% of all reports recorded open crow traps (69). 85% of these were secured open, 12% were open but not secured, and 3% (2 traps) had the doors partially open. Out of the 59 traps that were secured open, 81% had the doors tied open and 19% had either the door or the roof removed. Seven traps were found constructed without doors.

Live 'decoy' birds:
47 reports (12% of 407) involved one or more live target species found in traps. It is impossible to tell whether or not any of these birds were being used as 'decoys'. Of 27 traps, 16 (59%) contained food, water and shelter. The remaining traps were missing at least one of these three requirements, and dead birds were found in four of them.

Out of all the traps containing 'food' (26), many contained old, dried meat that could be described as 'inadequate'. The 'food' recorded was mostly in the form of dead lagomorphs (rabbit and hare), pheasants and deer. Dead foxes and grain were found in a few cases. Sheep and other livestock have been found in traps on several occasions, in contravention of the Animal By-Products Order (1999).

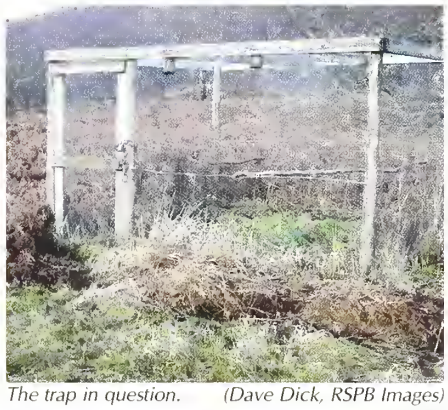
Analysis and Discussion

Distribution of crow traps:
In our experience, crow cage traps are often associated with upland areas and grouse moors, and it would be interesting to compare this distribution to land area managed for grouse shooting in Scotland.

Dead birds found in crow traps:
The records above show that despite the legislation, dead, and starved birds are still being found in crow traps. 40% of all birds reported in crow traps were dead, but consider that the real proportion may be larger because people are probably more likely to spot, approach and report a trap containing a live bird. The welfare of both target and non-target species is clearly not being protected effectively, and the problem must be one of lack of enforcement.

Enforcement of any of the open general licence conditions can be extremely difficult because there is often more than one 'authorised person' who could legitimately operate a particular trap. If this is the case, only a direct admission of responsibility by an individual will convict them of any offence being committed. This problem could be solved by recording the precise location of each crow cage trap and licensing a specific individual to be responsible for its operation.

APPENDIX 2 – Selected incidents of protected species found dead.
1. On 26th May 2004, the skeletal remains of two short-eared owls and one long-eared owl were found in a crow cage on heather moor at an area known as the Caterthuns near Edzell in Angus. The trap had a padlock and chain at the door, which was not in use. The door appeared to have been closed by the growth of vegetation across it. On being interviewed by police, the "new" local gamekeeper said he had never used the trap and assumed it was not set.



The trap in question. *(Dave Dick, RSPB Images)*

The photograph (at foot of page) shows an owl skull from the trap.

2. On December 3rd 2003, a tawny owl was found dead by a walker at Novar in Easter Ross in a set and padlocked crow cage trap. The gamekeeper interviewed by police said that a hole at the top of the door was sufficient for birds to get out (see photo above). No proceedings were taken.

The owl skull, with the museum specimen for comparison. *(Dave Dick, RSPB Images)*

The Glen Tarken ladder trap. *(Dave Dick, RSPB Images)*

3. On December 22nd 2001 a sparrowhawk skeleton was found inside a ladder crow cage trap on a grouse moor at Glen Tarken, Perthshire. The cage had an SGA/Tayside police sign attached detailing the licence requirements including the need for the operator to remove all caught birds. The gamekeeper in charge of the trap claimed that he had left the trap open some months before. A court case failed due to lack of corroborated evidence (see photo).

Traps not in use:
Even if the trap operator does admit responsibility, a conviction may still not be possible. In cases where dead or dying birds have been found in traps, accused individuals have been known to claim that the trap was not in use at the time. The explanation is that it had been left open and 'someone else' must have come along and shut it without their knowledge, or that the wind might have blown the door to. Although these explanations are improbable, they are not impossible.

Of 69 traps found open between 1998 and 2004, 85% were secured open, either by tying the door back, or by removal of the door or roof. These traps had obviously been deliberately disabled, in compliance with licence conditions. However, 12% of open traps were found with the doors open but not secured. Two traps were also found with doors ajar.

The ambiguity in the legislation leaves room for both accidental misuse of crow traps and deliberate neglect This ambiguity could be amended with a requirement for the removal of the door from the trap location when the trap is not in use.

Non-target species:
The indiscriminate nature of crow cage traps means that there is always a risk of non-target species being caught It is worth repeating that many of these species are likely to die far more quickly than the target corvids due to their small size and specialist feeding or roosting requirements. At certain times of year this mortality will also include the starving or death by exposure of dependent young of the trapped birds. At a time when the common buzzard in particular is unpopular on shooting estates (with calls for licences to cull them) it should not be surprising that people finding buzzards caught in traps might suspect that they are being deliberately targeted. Indeed the RSPB has received allegations of this kind of criminal activity.

Live 'decoy' birds:
Only one of the three general licences authorising the use of crow cage traps in Scotland specifically mentions and permits the use of decoys. Decoy birds would have to be 'readily identifiable' to distinguish them from 'caught' birds that must be removed at each daily inspection. We are unaware of any such marking taking place – this was not recorded by any of the observers in the present study.

The requirement that decoy birds are the same species as target birds is reasonable and practical when applied to corvids. However, pigeons are a popular prey species for many birds of prey, and RSPB would argue that their use as decoys in crow traps significantly increases the risk to birds of prey. As well as this incidental risk, while pigeons remain legitimate decoy species it is possible to disguise their real use as live bait to deliberately target birds of prey.

Legitimate pest controllers, such as Rentokil, who commonly trap pigeons in or near food stores and other buildings, use single compartment small portable cage traps with "walk-in" entrances. It would surely be a relatively simple matter to create a separate licence specifically for that type of trapping of pigeons.

Conclusion and Recommendations:
Action must be taken to decrease the risk of death by starvation or exposure for all birds, and particularly to reduce the risk to non-target species. Licences must have clear, consistent conditions that are easy to follow and, where necessary, enforce.

RSPB responded to the 2000 government consultation on open general licences with a list of suggestions and recommendations (appendix 4).

Appendix 4: RSPB 2000 Consultation Response Summary Recommendations

1 Continue with the Open General Licence (OGL) but with tighter conditions.

2 Encourage enforcement authorities to take a strong line on infringements.

3 All traps locations to be made available to authorities.

4 A code of good practice, linked to the OGL, to be drawn up as a matter of urgency.

5 Wide publicity for the Code of Practice and the revised OGL on their introduction.

6 Define the mesh size for cage traps.

7 Make checking every 24 hours

8 Record all birds caught.

9 Restrict their use to open ground.

10 If legitimised, introduce welfare conditions to cover decoy corvids.

11 Initiate an impartial scientific study into the use and effects of crow cage trapping.

12 Until the results of the above study are available, retain the status quo on reasons for trapping.

13 Review the licensing of these traps after a "desk study" of other countries' experience.

Only one of these (the requirement for checking traps every 24 hours) has been implemented in full. These points still require serious consideration and changes should be made to the licences accordingly. In addition to our previous recommendations we would add:

1 removal of door from trap site to fully disable crow traps whilst not in use.

2 registration of individual traps to a single responsible individual.

3 consistency and clarity between open general licences on the use of decoy birds.

Dave Dick

NOTES & COMMENT

Nuthatch spread

Following the appearance of Nuthatches in Lanarkshire last year, a pair has just raised a brood in a box in Dalzell Woods, just above Baron's Haugh Reserve, Motherwell – the photo shows the male in full song.

Male singing on territory. *(Lang Stewart)*

Starling's use of Sheep's Wool

I usually provide additional nesting material for my garden birds and in mid-March stuck into some shrubs, strands of sheep's wool, which is popular with Blue Tits. On 31st March, I saw a Starling with some of the wool in its bill. Thinking it was going to take it to its nest, I was completely taken aback by what happened next. The bird stretched out a wing and drew the wool along its feathers in a preening action. It did this three or four times before dropping the wool and flying off. The wool was deftly dropped and obviously hadn't merely got stuck to the bird's bill. The whole act looked completely deliberate and I can only assume the oily property of the wool attracted the Starling to use it as it did.

Margaret Cowie

Woodcock behaviour

On Sunday 20 March at 11.30 am, I was fortunate to have a remarkably good view of a Woodcock in the open. I flushed it from close to the Glenrath Burn in Manor Valley near Peebles (NT227310). The habitat is rough grazing: grass/bracken/heather mix and the elevation here is 375m.

It flew upstream about 40 m and landed in full view on the steep side slope near the burn among the same vegetation. Its wonderfully cryptic plumage was most impressive, the broad dark band across the nape surrounded by a lighter strip being very distinctive. It proceeded to walk very slowly uphill with its tail erect, reminiscent of a (very large!) Wren. I watched it for several minutes during

Woodcock on nest. *(Frank Stark)*

which it only moved a metre or two. The most striking part of its behaviour was that while it moved forwards very slowly it bobbed rapidly and deeply. Its movements were reminiscent of a Common Sandpiper but with a greater amplitude.

I have not been able to find any reference to this bobbing behaviour in a Woodcock in any of my reference books or in BWP (on CD).

Graham Pyatt

Caption Competition

Provide a caption for the woodpecker picture below right and have a chance of winning an SOC hat.

Each SBN will feature a new photo. The winner and other best captions will be shown in the next edition. Send your single caption by E-mail to jimmy.maxwell @virgin.net (or of course by mail to the SOC – see Page 3).

Cormorants. *(Lang Stewart)*

The winning Caption from *SBN* 75 (see photo above) came from Morag Maxwell with - "Amazing avian re-enactment of 'Witches scene' from Macbeth" – congratulations! Others – " Beheading or Life Sentence????"- (Keith Brockie),
"They can't be talking about us, can they?" – (John Reid), and "Right Sid, I'll get the one on the right - you hit the other two with your chain" – (William Isherwood)

Dunnock on seed feeder

A few weeks ago we noticed a Dunnock trying to access one of the feeders in our Edinburgh garden. This contained mixed seeds and tended to be ignored by Tits which prefer feeders with peanuts or sunflower seeds. It was a very inefficient attempt, flying down from a perch and flapping while trying to grab a seed. Over time proficiency has increased markedly and the bird can now perch holding itself against the feeder for some seconds while extracting seeds. Although we have more than one Dunnock frequenting the garden, I assume it is just one bird that has learnt this trick. There is nothing in *BWP* or Concise *BWP* about Dunnock feeding in this way.

John Davies

Great spotted Woodpecker. *(Jimmy Maxwell)*

Hooded Crow eating lichen

I watched and photographed a hooded crow eating lichen/bark from a fallen beech tree. I thought at first it was pecking the tree just for the hell of it, as crows do, or perhaps collecting nesting material, but it definitely swallowed the lichen and the photo shows this. Could the bird have been finding insect food and be swallowing the lichen inadvertently or is it possible that vitamins or minerals could be contained in the lichen?

Frank Stark

Hooded Crow and lichen. *(Frank Stark)*

Treecreeper nest-height

Treecreeper at the nest in the car park at the head of Glen Clova where it was feeding young at the early date of 14 April. The nest was only 9 inches off the ground. Has anyone heard of a nest at this height or lower!

Keith Macgregor

Treecreeper site. *(Keith Macgregor)*

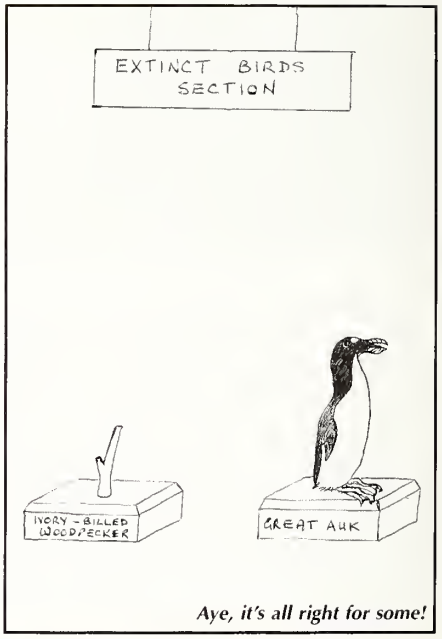
My best Hawk Watching experience

I live on an island off the west coast of Scotland. Many birders, both British and American, would envy me in my location. Though the island is not large, fifteen miles north to south, and about five miles east-west, I have an excellent hawk population to watch. European Buzzards, close relatives of Red Tails, are common, thirty seven pairs nesting. Peregrine Falcon and Kestrel are not hard to find. We have breeding Hen Harriers, and occasionally a Golden Eagle decides to nest on the island, rather than in the Argyll hills. Sparrow Hawks regularly visit my bird table. However, my best hawk watching experience was not in Scotland.

It was in Cape May, New Jersey. The date: 7 October 2000. I had spent much of the morning at the Hawk Watch, and NW winds were sending good numbers of hawks overhead. I went over to the Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge, and walked through to the shore. As I was approaching the dune, I noticed an American Kestrel flying south at the level of the dune's top. Then another... and another. I moved slowly and carefully to the dune and sat down just below the crest. For the next hour, Kestrel upon Kestrel passed by me. I was eye ball to eye ball with each one. The light was superb, the weather warm. Two hundred birds passed by in just over an hour. That was my best hawk watching experience.

Prof. Michael Thomas

This short Note from an SOC Clyde Branch member describes the kind of one-off exciting birding which many of us must have experienced. We would welcome any other contributions from Branch members, either telling of their personal "hawk days" or sharing other unusual/amusing birding encounters. Eds.



Aye, it's all right for some!

American Kestrel. *(Kevin Watson, USA)*

BOOK REVIEWS

Birds and Mammals of Caithness – Robert Innes Shearer's contributions to the natural history of Caithness, 1859–1867. *Compiled and edited by Hugh Clark & Robin M. Sellers. Bellfield Pub. 2005. £14.95 incl. P&P*

Rbt. Shearer was born in 1826 at Upper Thrumster, Caithness and lived most of his life there until he died in 1872. He was a first rate observer of wildlife and was one of the first people to write about the birds and mammals in that area. Between 1859 and 1867 he wrote 62 articles on birds and 12 on mammals, all of which were published in the local newspaper, John O'Groat Journal, except for four of the bird articles - three of which were published in "The Field" and one in "Proceedings of the Royal Physical Society of Edinburgh". All of these articles are reproduced in this book and the editors have added a commentary after each to expand on some of the points made by RIS and to bring up to date the status of each species in Caithness today.

The style is from a bygone age and rather endearing. For example, Shearer starts his account of the Puffin by describing it as a "strangely formed bird... a summer visitant to the eastern shores". Terms like "natatorial" (swimming) and "galliatorial (wading) are not current today. I found this a most interesting read and recommend it to anyone interested in the birds of northern Scotland or the history of ornithology.

Stan da Prato
(cheques payable to H.Clark at 3, Lindsay Place, Wick, Caithness, KW1 4PF)

Where to Watch Birds In Peru. *Thomas Valqui. 2004. Grafica Nanez, Peru. ISBN 9972-33-092-3. 382 pp. £19.99. Sb*

Peru has about one fifth of all the world's bird species, and is therefore an essential country to visit for the would-be world lister. For a number of years there were areas where it was unsafe to visit, thankfully the political situation has changed and most places can now be visited in safety. The book is divided into the seven biogeographic bird regions with a chapter describing each and coloured photographs of the different habitats. Some 151 sites are detailed with maps and a list of species to be found, both common and rare. These maps are typical of what the travelling birder has become used to using with all the challenges of discovering where exactly a particular trail starts and finishes!

There is a scattering of black and white drawings of birds to break up the text and these add interest to this well laid out book.

The final hundred pages include a Glossary of Terms, a Directory of Tour Operators, List of Contacts, References by Chapter, a Checklist and finally an Index.

As a birding aid this pocket-sized guide would be an essential purchase when planning and travelling in this bird rich country.

David Clugston

Albatrosses and Petrels across the World*, Michael Brooke. Illustrated by John Cox. Oxford University Press 2004. No price stated.*

Not since F. du Cane Godman, completed his *Monograph of the Petrels* in 1910 has there been a thorough review of most of the worlds Procellariiformes. Warham's two volumes (1990 & 1996) on the petrels dealt mainly with their Biology, Behaviour, Physiology and Ecology. Brooke's review of the *Albatrosses and Petrels across the World* is therefore long overdue.

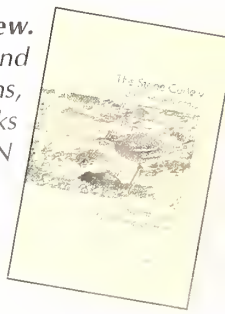
This is a species by species account of the various petrels, shearwaters and albatrosses to be found around this planet and makes for interesting reading. Some are extremely abundant while others are extremely rare. Each species is reviewed in some detail where the information exists and, where it doesn't, the account is obviously shorter and perhaps shows the gaps where further study is required. The introductory chapters forming the first part of the book are a good insight into petrel study and behaviour although one could argue several basic points. For example under the heading "How does a petrel detect prey" the author seems ambivalent that many squid, crustacean and fish preys of petrels are bioluminescent and most, if not all, petrels eat these very items. Whether the light organs point upwards or downwards on the creature is irrelevant since the prey will be seen lit up or in outline in a dark sea, from a petrel's perspective.

Of the species accounts, many represent scarce and unstudied birds. One such, the New Zealand Storm Petrel, was so recently re-discovered, in November 2003 (after an absence of around 150 years), that it has been stuck in at the very start of the book beside the petrel topography, a rather odd decision, since the other Storm Petrels are at the end. Looking at more familiar species, the Northern Fulmar account includes three subspecies and we are told that, from a rather tiny sample size, the race *auduboni* differs from *glacialis* in bill length. It looks to me rather more like a simple cline. The treatment of the Little and Audubon's Shearwater group seems also rather confused with several subspecies probably deserving full species status. Of the rarer petrels, some of the Pterodromas are close to extinction for example Zino's Petrel (named after Paul Alexander Zino, not his son Francis, as mentioned here) inhabits the high inland mountains of Madeira and has suffered from predation by rats and feral cats. The latest data on these is presented. The Jamaica Petrel, on the other hand, is probably extinct, having not been positively identified alive since 1891, although searches continue in the hope that a few pairs remain. The author's mention of perhaps "a few hundred pairs" seems hugely over-optimistic.

The Storm-petrels are given the same attention as the larger species. The European Storm Petrel account could have been more accurate. The map shows the species absent from the North Sea (as per BWP Vol 1) when enough have now been caught and ringed on the east coast of Scotland and north England to prove this is not so. Similarly, while UK ringed birds wander all over the eastern North Atlantic waters, penetrate the Mediterranean and migrate to the seas off the Cape of Good Hope, those ringed in the Mediterranean have never been found outside of that sea area, and probably deserve their sub-specific status.

All in all, there are some useful colour plates and this book is a very handy reference work, despite the numerous points of contention, and should be in the hands of every person interested in these fascinating birds.

Bernard Zonfrillo



The Stone Curlew. *Richard Vaughan and Nancy Vaughan Jenkins, 2005. Isabelline Books Plymouth, 345 pp, ISBN 0-9542955-6-0, £35.*

Sightings of Stone Curlews in Scotland are rare, and it has never bred here. In England it is on one edge of its contracting range, and although breeding numbers have risen in the past few years it is now confined to very few counties. The densest and largest populations are in Iberia. All the same it is a strange and fascinating species,

though spotting it in the field can be tricky even with a Reserve warden telling you exactly where to look.

This book is the only one on the species, and likely to remain so for years to come. The authors are father (historian) and daughter (zoologist); both aspects are well covered. There are chapters on the family of "thick-knees", on habitat, population, migration, breeding, diet and conservation of this species, plus a whole chapter on its calls. There are 75 tables, 13 figures, 11 maps, 28 photographs and many useful line drawings. The style is very much that of a series of scientific papers, but the writing is a good deal better than that may suggest. The occasional obscure technical word goes unexplained, but this is not a serious problem. Production is generally excellent, though with a very few lapses: e.g. photographs listed in one order but printed in another, maps drawn freehand with hand-written labels not always clear. Recent totals of English breeding numbers are given in detail but not by counties, the latest reference on that being dated 1985 – there must be a good reason for this.

In an otherwise excellent book, these points should not deter prospective purchasers. We must hope that sales will justify a second (paperback?) edition in which they can be corrected, and which will reward the authors' hard work and the publisher's courage in bringing the book out. Anyone with even a modest interest in Stone Curlews should buy now.

John Law

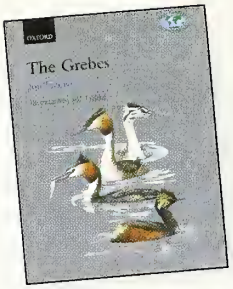
Eric Ennion: One Man's Birds. *Edited by Bob Walthew. The Wildlife Art Gallery. 2004. 144pp. ISBN 0-9526-2368-4*

Eric Ennion was a key figure in 20th Century wildlife art and his work had a tremendous influence on many wildlife artists working today. He was a founder member, and first chairman, of the Society of Wildlife Artists and set up the Field Study Centre at Flatford Mill where he also became the first warden. The courses that he ran there encouraged and enthused artists and naturalists from all over the country.

This book concentrates on the field sketches, working designs and illustration plates which Ennion produced in the 1930s when he lived and worked in Burwell, in the Cambridgeshire Fens. This collection became the source material for many of his later compositions and one can see themes being reworked from initial sketches through several versions. The images are sympathetically complemented by the artist's evocative writings which have been collected from published magazine articles and from the manuscripts of two unpublished books. These essays combine beautiful descriptions of scenes that would be familiar to any birdwatcher today, with prose that conjures up an era that has long passed. As a naturalist who was skilled at field-craft and observation, Ennion often described unusual and unrecorded behaviour in words and sketches. Some plates of Water Rails and courting Phalaropes are particularly impressive. Although most of the subjects depicted are birds that Ennion found close to home, there are chapters covering his trips to the Isle of Skye, Nethy Bridge and Sutherland: birwatching spots which will be familiar to almost every SOC member.

It is, of course, the artwork which makes this book so impressive. Ennion's work was lively and immediate and his passion for the subject leaps out of these pages. This must have been a difficult book to produce: the sketches and plates were painted on odd shapes and colours of paper, often on the backs of envelopes and oddly shaped off-cuts. The artist frequently cut and pasted images together and scribbled untidy notes into margins. It is to the publisher's credit that they have been able to compose these pictures into a pleasing design that captures the immediacy and excitement of field-sketching. This is a good quality publication, is excellent value, and features a collection of some 500 illustrations. It is produced in full colour throughout and is a must-have for anyone interested in wildlife art, but it also conjures up the excitement and thrill of being out in the field that will appeal to birdwatchers everywhere.

Derek Robertson



The Grebes. *By Jon Fjeldså. 2004. 246pp. 8 colour plates, numerous black-and-white drawings and maps. ISBN 0 19 850064 5. Oxford University Press, £95.00.*

The author of this latest volume in the Oxford University Press 'Bird Families of the World' series, has studied grebes for over 30 years and contributed immensely to our knowledge of their morphology, ecology and behaviour. The bulk of his work has been carried out in South America, home to a majority of the world's 19 species (and, formerly, to two of the three extinct ones), and the detailed knowledge he has acquired of the different species and their requirements has been put to good use. He is in the position of being able to not just lobby and then advise governments on the conservation of grebes, and to encourage them recognise the value of grebes in monitoring the health of wetlands, but also to cajole local communities into undertaking active measures to try and save rare species, for example, the Junín Flightless Grebe (*Podiceps taczanowskii*).

The bulk of the book deals with topics such as the constraints of being a diving bird, morphology, biogeography, distribution, feeding ecology, behaviour and breeding, with important chapters on environmental threats (depressingly numerous) and conservation (some successes), followed by two-three page species accounts.

The text is illustrated with the author's own delightful line drawings of morphology and behaviour. The four colour plates of the different plumages, including the downy young, are very well painted by the author. The four colour plates of photographs of birds and their habitats are rather ordinary.

My one grumble about the book is that, although the author writes good English, it is, not infrequently, somewhat stilted and sentences are poorly constructed because, after all, he is writing in a foreign language. I am certainly not grumbling at him, but at the publishers who have let the author down by failing to ensure that the quality of the written text matched the high quality of the content, also bearing in mind that this in an expensive book belonging to what they market as a prestigious series. Shame on them!

That said, this is without doubt the definitive work on the grebe family and will remain so for many years to come.

Malcolm Ogilvie

Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America. 2003 reprinted 2004. Klaus Malling Olsen and Hans Larsson. Christopher Helm, London. (608 (??) pages, 96 plates, over 800 photographs)

Gull aficionados eagerly awaited this book and when it did finally appear in 2003, it was marred by printing errors, particularly in the distribution maps and several wing pattern plates. It was quickly recalled and reprinted in 2004. So, was it worth waiting for? The answer has to be a resounding

"yes". It represents an efficient but surprisingly readable fusion of the author's own observations with all the cutting edge literature on gull identification.

Introductory pages cover the influence of feather wear, bleaching, moult and light conditions on plumage patterns, apparent mantle tone, etc. - all useful stuff to bear in mind when trying to pick out *argentatus* Herring Gulls among the local *argenteus*, or in deciding whether that potential *smithsonianus* really does lack tertial fringing or it's just been worn away.

While primarily an identification guide, there are also sections on voice, moult, biometrics and distribution & migration. I found the latter accounts to be comprehensive and up-to-date, including estimates of both breeding and wintering populations. Range expansions, such as those of Yellow-legged Gull and Mediterranean Gull into North Western Europe, are documented in some detail. In some cases population changes are linked to environmental factors. It was surprising to learn that measures to conserve Spanish inshore fisheries actually resulted in reduced breeding success for the globally rare Audouin's Gull at its main colony.

It is however, the identification material and photographs that form the substance of the book. Each species and diagnosable form is covered for every definable plumage stage, with the main ageing features brought together in a little summary box. The guidance is not simply a re-hash of information available elsewhere, but incorporates the author's own museum work and extensive field observations. It is refreshingly uncliched and benefits from the frequent use of appropriate metaphors: Laughing Gulls do look "sleepy" and Mediterranean Gulls do have a plump, "well-fed" air amongst Black-headeds, but the "free and easy" gait of Ring-billed Gull is lost on me!

The illustrations by Hans Larsson are superb; easily the best to be found outwith the specialist ID articles. Perhaps the difference in mantle tone between *graellsii* and *intermedius* Lesser Black-backed Gulls on page 24 is a tad overdone, while the upper parts of the first year Glaucous and Iceland Gulls look a little too "scaly" to me, but these quibbles are insignificant in the overall context.

The difficult, large white-headed gulls (LWHGs) are given particular attention, including two sets of comparison plates, one showing typical adults side by side, the other illustrating adult wing-tip patterns. Depicting typical wing tips of each form along with the commoner variants is particularly important. The accompanying text highlights the distinctive features in each case, e.g. the position/size of mirrors, the distribution of black on the outer primaries, the extent to which the paler grey tones intrude into the black, etc. Such fine detail is often critical to the separation of extremely similar forms and these plates will prove enormously valuable when a mystery bird obligingly stretches its wings or can be photographed in flight.

The photographs all show something relevant to the identification of the species or form and complement the plates in showing the consistent features described for typical birds, while hinting at the wider variation seen in the field. The photographs range from just one for a few southern hemisphere vagrants (e.g. Grey Gull) to no less than 54 for the eastern Yellow-legged Gull complex (three forms), with 15 to 30 for most. The sheer number of images coupled with a priority to maximise the size of the bird has however produced some densely packed pages and closely cropped images. Nevertheless, most gull buffs will agree with this prioritisation of important detail over the more aesthetic aspects.

Birders may be disappointed, having hoped this book would magically demystify gull identification. There is however, no attempt to over-simplify the situation: many LWHGs are a genuine challenge and no amount of skilful analysis will ever change that. Rather, the author chooses not to muddy the water unduly with the full range of variation (which might have been impossible anyway).

This is not a coffee table book (although it's been on mine for a while) of the type designed just to look nice. It is a practical, up-to-date identification guide to a group of birds that includes some enduring identification challenges for those keen enough - or daft enough - to care. Its efficient condensation of the available information into one manageable and readable volume should ensure its position as the single best identification resource on gulls for years to come.

Many birders just "don't get" gulls and never will, but if you have the bug then you must buy this book.

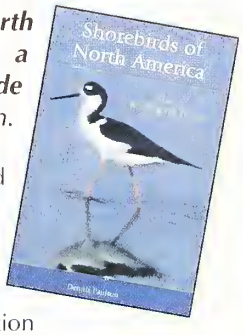
Dr John Sweeney

The Birdwatcher's Companion. *Malcolm Tait and Olive Tayler ISBN 1-86105-833-0 Robson Books £9.99*

Supermarkets (with the honourable exception of Tesco) have displays of sweets, etc., by the check-out, intended to tempt you to an impulse purchase. Book shops do this too, with small books handy to fit into your pocket. A few years ago these were called the Little Book of... The Schott's Original Miscellany appeared, and so did a range of similar books. This is a miscellany: its subtitle 'winged wonders, fantastic flocks & outstanding ornithology' describes it better than its title. It is 205 x 125 mm (approx.), has 150 pages of miscellaneous facts mixed with poems, jokes, cartoons and questions. Each page number has alongside it a fact associated with that number (44 is the incubation in days of a Gannet). If you like this sort of book then you may want to pick this one up when you see it.

John Davies

Shorebirds of North America – a photographic guide *by Dennis Paulson.*



I was very impressed by this book, by its waterproof cover and good size for taking out in the field. The introduction is well written with anatomical details clearly illustrated with photographs and good descriptions of plumage variation due to age, geographical location, wear and tear, sex and hybrids, if appropriate. There is also a section giving tips on identification, including behaviour and vocalization. A few short notes on distribution, conservation and populations of breeding and migrant species complete the introduction.

The rest of the book is a wonderful collection of 94 species with over 530 striking colour photographs showing the birds in varied plumages, at rest and in flight – all helping to make identification much easier. A brief description of voice, behaviour, habitat and range are given for each species. There are good comparisons of similar species and immatures - normally a nightmare to identify!

Dennis Paulson is the Director of the Slater Museum of Natural History and teaches biology at the university. He has written several books on different aspects of natural history. This is just the type of book I would take with me when visiting that part of the world.

Janet Crummy

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RECENT REPORTS

A Review of spring 2005

Belted Kingfisher, N-E Scotland *(Harry Scott)*

After last autumn, when no fewer than four new species for Scotland were seen, amazingly this spring saw yet another new Scottish bird with a 1st-summer male **Belted Kingfisher** on the River Dee at Peterculter (Aberdeenshire) on 4th–9th Apr. Only the sixth record for Britain and Ireland, this bird had improbably been first seen on 1st Apr in Staffordshire and then the next day in East Yorkshire. That was not the end of the excitement in North-East Scotland though with in May a drake **Barrow's Goldeneye** found at Meikle Loch on 13th. There is only one previously accepted record in Britain – the drake in Nov/Dec 1979 at Irvine (Ayrshire). This year's bird, which remained in the Meikle Loch/Ythan Estuary area until 22nd May, moving to the RSPB Loch of Strathbeg reserve and remaining there until 6th June at least, has the potential to be the second official British record – it certainly proved popular during its long stay. The other outstanding highlight in May has to be the **Squacco Heron** at Kilconquhar Loch (Fife) on 22nd (and then reported in west Fife at Peppermill Dam on 24th). There are only three previous accepted Scottish records (the last being on Lewis in 1913). One in Renfrewshire in 1994, in a good year for the species nationally, has never been submitted.

Squacco Heron, Fife *(Tony O'Connor)*

Barrow's Goldeneye *(Harry Scott)*

Overall, it was not a vintage spring for rarities and scarcities and in many cases even common migrants were not seen in great numbers. In March, a **Great White Egret** was at Wards Pond (West Dunbartonshire) on 23rd-31st – the earliest ever in Scotland, whilst the earliest ever spring **Common Rosefinch** was at Cunningsburgh (Shetland) on 23rd-29th with eight more seen at the end of May from the 20th – all on the Northern Isles. Also in March, a **Hoopoe** was at Strath Chrumbuill (Highland) on 23rd-25th with five then reported in April and three in May. Into April and after the fantastic autumn for eastern vagrants last year it was perhaps inevitable that some would be seen on return spring passage and so it proved with a **White's Thrush** at Easter Quarff (Shetland) on 27th-28th – only the second spring record for Britain and Ireland. A male **Citrine Wagtail** was on Fair Isle on 29th Apr-2nd May, whilst also in April, a male **Western Subalpine Warbler** was at Windwick, South Ronaldsay (Orkney) on at least 25th. Two more **Subalpine Warblers** were seen in May: a female at Collieston (Aberdeenshire) on 20th and a male at Whitesands Bay (Lothian) on 28th (only the second county record), whilst into June a female was on Fair Isle from the 2nd with another female at Toab (Shetland) on 6th.

Fair Isle had the best of slim pickings for rarities on the Northern Isles in May with a **Great Reed Warbler** trapped on the

Great White Egret, Loch Lomond (Jim Duncan)

The only **Short-toed Lark** reported was on Fair Isle on 24th May, the only **Rose-coloured Starling** was an adult reported on Coll (Argyll) on 11th May, 10 **Icterine Warblers** were seen in May including four on Fair Isle on 25th and one on North Rona (Outer Hebrides) on 23rd whilst 16 **Red-backed Shrikes** were reported in May from the 20th including three males at Tarbat Ness (Highland) on 29th. Two **Bee-eaters** were seen in the last week of May: at Kinbrace (Highland) on 24th and then on Shapinsay (Orkney) on 26th and there was a very good showing by **Golden Oriole** with 15+ from 20th May onwards, most of which were on Shetland though two were reported on the Outer Hebrides and one was at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (Aberdeenshire) on 28th. Six **Marsh Warblers** were seen from the 24th May, all on Shetland, apart from one at St Abbs Head (Borders) on 28th.

The last **Northern Bullfinches** were reported from Shetland and Orkney in early May with none reported after the 11th whilst **Waxwings** remained in good numbers around Aberdeen and Edinburgh into the second week of May with the last two at Bridge of Don, Aberdeen on 19th. However, the last week of May saw a few stragglers on the Outer Hebrides and Northern Isles with one on Harris on 22nd and one on Fair Isle on 28th. It looks like being a **Quail** year with good numbers reported in May with perhaps 20+ from the 14th. In May, singing **Spotted Crakes** were noted at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (Aberdeenshire), RSPB Loch of Kinnordy (Angus) and on Tiree (Argyll) whilst up to 12 **Common Cranes** were logged from 20th April. There was a very good showing by **Black Kite** with singles in April on Mainland Orkney on 29th and over RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (Aberdeenshire) the same day with in May one at Loch More (Caithness) on 24th and one seen near Blackdog (Aberdeenshire) on 27th.

In March, a white morph **Gyr Falcon** was seen around Mainland Shetland on at least four dates between 6th-28th with another on St Kilda (Outer Hebrides) on 11th. Also on the Outer Hebrides in March a **Rough-legged Buzzard** was seen on North Uist on 6th-20th and in June one lingered unusually at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg on 1st-5th. At least six different

Hoopoe, Highland (Alastair McNee)

13th and two **Rustic Buntings**, on the 8th and 19th with elsewhere in May a male at Baltasound, Unst (Shetland) on 22nd and a popular showy male near Auchmithie on the 28th-29th – the first record for Angus. In a purple patch on the East Lothian coast, as well as the Subalpine Warbler at Whitesands, a 1st-summer male **Red-footed Falcon** was also seen there briefly on the 28th. The bank holiday weekend at the end of May proved the best period for spring rarities and scarcities, though by recent standards, totals were low. Only seven **Wrynecks** were reported between 19th Apr-14th May, all on Shetland, 14 **Bluethroats** were seen from 19th May, (all on Shetland apart from a male on the Isle of May on 22nd) and a **Tawny Pipit** was on Fair Isle on 23rd-31st May. A **Richard's Pipit** was also seen there in May, on the 2nd-8th, two **Shore Larks** were observed in May on Fair Isle (on 4th-6th and 13th-14th) with another in May on North Rona (Outer Hebrides) on 23rd.

Rustic Bunting, Angus (Willie McBay)

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Snowy Owl, Fair Isle *(Deryk Shaw)*

Snowy Owls were seen in the period with one in Caithness on 10th Mar, presumably one bird involved in sightings on Stronsay (Orkney) on 26th-30th Mar, Fair Isle on 2nd Apr then Unst (Shetland) on 4th May and an exceptional showing on the Outer Hebrides with at least four different birds in the period with sightings on Lewis, Harris, North Uist (2), South Uist and St Kilda. The wintering **American Coot** on Coot Loch, Benbecula was last seen on 7th Apr with the bird on Shetland at Loch of Benston last reported on the 25th Mar. Also on Shetland the over-wintering **Dark-breasted Barn Owl** was sadly found dead at Veensgarth on 26th Apr with also in April **Barn Owl** seen at Firth on the 8th - only the second record of a pale-breasted individual on Orkney.

For the third April running, a passage of **White-billed Divers** was again noted off the north and east coasts of Lewis with between 3rd Apr-22nd May at least nine different birds seen including day counts of seven on the 19th and 24th Apr. Also in April further birds were seen in Argyll and off Harris whilst in May an adult proved popular near Burghead (Moray) on 3rd-7th and on Lewis an adult flew past Mangurstadh on 5th with two adults seen on the 7th and on Shetland a 1st-summer past Eshaness on 8th May. The over-wintering **Bonaparte's Gull** remained at Thurso (Caithness) until the 29th Apr at least, whilst up to four different birds were seen on the Outer Hebrides in the period. The status of **Ring-billed Gull** appears to be changing in Scotland with 12+ reported in the period, all in Argyll and the Outer Hebrides apart from a 1st-summer near Miltonhill (Moray) on 27th Apr. It was not a vintage spring skua passage this year on either the Outer Hebrides or Shetland, though the passage, of **Pomarine Skua** at least, seems to be starting earlier with the first noted past Aird an Runair, North Uist (Outer Hebrides) on 17th Mar. A total of 75 Pomarine Skuas were sighted past there in April whilst in May the passage was mostly centred around the 5th-7th when 255 were noted. On Shetland 124 Pomarines passed Wats Ness on 7th May with 318 past nearby Eshaness on 8th and 191 seen on the 9th. The **Long-tailed Skua** totals in May though were very low with six past Eshaness on 9th the largest count.

The star wader was definitely the **Broad-billed Sandpiper** on Tiree (Argyll) on 31st May-1st June, though three different **Red-necked Phalaropes** on Shetland on the 10th May were the earliest ever there. A **Pectoral Sandpiper** was at Bru, Lewis (Outer Hebrides) on 21st May and a **Kentish Plover** near Birgham on 1st May will be the first record for Borders if accepted. Only two **Temminck's Stints** were reported in May: on Coll (Argyll) and at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg. Three **Avocet** sightings in May possibly all involve the same bird: in chronological order, at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg, then Skinflats (Upper Forth) and then again in Aberdeenshire on the Ythan Estuary into June, whilst there was a Scottish record count of 811 **Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits** on the Eden Estuary (Fife) on 10th Apr.

Amongst wildfowl, highlights included a female **Blue-winged Teal** at Brodgar (Orkney) on 27th –31st May and up to six **King Eiders** on Shetland, Dumfries & Galloway, Ayrshire and Aberdeenshire with two drake **Northern Eiders**, form *borealis*, at Reef, Lewis (outer Hebrides) on 21st Apr-8th May. A drake **Lesser Scaup** was at Blair Drummond GPs (Upper Forth) on 23rd Mar-4th Apr – the second record for Upper Forth.

Amongst highlights in the first week of June, single **Red-rumped Swallows** were on Shetland at Whalsay on 4th and then Fair Isle on 5th-6th whilst also on Shetland a female **Sardinian Warbler** was in Lerwick on 2nd-4th with in Moray a **Woodchat Shrike** seen briefly at Covesea on 2nd.

Angus Murray

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The Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC) was established by a group of Scottish ornithologists who met together in the rooms of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society in Edinburgh on 24th March 1936.

The Club now has 2200 members and 14 branches around Scotland. It plays a central role in Scottish birdwatching, bringing together amateur birdwatchers, keen birders and research ornithologists with the aims of documenting, studying and, not least, enjoying Scotland's varied birdlife. Above all, the SOC is a club, relying heavily on keen volunteers and the support of its membership.

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